



David Ponraj

Dunedin, Florida



[Startup Space](#)

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Learn about Florida Entrepreneur David Ponraj:

Born in India, David Ponraj, founder of Startup Space, moved to the U.S. to pursue an International Business Degree at St. Petersburg College.

Part of his senior capstone course included writing a business plan. Ponraj decided that if he was going to invest the time and energy into writing a business plan that it was going to be for an actual business.

From this exercise came Ponraj's first venture of importing and exporting textiles.

After he graduated, Ponraj moved back to India before his student visa expired. While in India, he continued to build out his business, which included securing a manufacturing facility. Ponraj eventually shut down that business, moved back to the U.S., was hired by Tech Data as a Business Analyst, got married and, in his spare time, got an MBA from

The University of South Florida. Ponraj explained his next move.

"Prior to launching Startup Space, I spent seven years with Nielsen Media Research," he said. "I was the VP of Global Innovation. I traveled the world working with startups, incubators and spent a lot of time in various entrepreneurial ecosystems. During my time at Nielsen, I always took ownership, thought outside the box and brought in additional resources like an entrepreneur. That's how I went from an analyst to VP in six years. While working for Nielsen, I also saw a need for startups to have better access to resources, peers and experts. Entrepreneurship is a very lonely endeavor. It helps to have a support system. Using my litmus test of, determining if I can add value, if there's a market and whether or not that market is willing to pay for the services, I came up with an idea to start a business that would assist startups. The idea became official and, in May of 2018, Startup Space was founded."

Since May, Startup Space has taken off. Ponraj shared that they're currently averaging 100 downloads per week with users from most major Florida cities and beyond. The platform allows small business owners, entrepreneurs, innovators and startups a space to come together through local online communities to find peer support, expert help, and a "sandbox" to incubate ideas and dreams. Think of Startup Space as an online incubator for "everyday" entrepreneurs. It's a place where anyone, not just those launching apps or tech-based startups, can find the support, guidance and connections they need to launch and grow their businesses.

When Ponraj first launched Startup Space, he pushed through some early fears, but relied on experience to gain traction and build a solid

customer base. "It was definitely scary, especially since I have a family," he said. "Some people keep their day jobs and build out their business on the side. When I launched Startup Space, I quit Nielsen cold turkey. I did so because I'm passionate about what I'm doing and I didn't want to have a fall back plan. Not long after we launched, I started speaking at different events. I've always been good at getting people to buy into a vision. I would say 90% of the people that sign up for the app have had some sort of interaction with me. It's my personal brand that built that trust for them to download a new app when they can get similar functionality with existing apps. They believe in my vision and see the passion I have. I've also focused heavily on the customer experience. I might not get it right the first time around, but if I'm ever contacted by a customer, I make things right for them as soon as I can. If someone pings me, I'm all over it and I work to understand their needs."

Looking ahead, Ponraj is working to get to the point where the app will grow organically. He's presenting at 1 Million Cups across the country and sharing his story with entrepreneurship programs at St. Petersburg College and Hillsborough Community College, the latter of which requires its students to use the Startup Space app. Within 12 months of launching the full model in October, Ponraj's goal is to have 120,000 users and \$100,000 in revenue. Within five years, he expects Startup Space to be the primary toolkit used by startups around the world. He's also writing a book about his journey. It's titled, 'How To Be a Father And an Entrepreneur' and highlights many parallels between how a company and children are born and raised.

What advice does Ponraj have for aspiring entrepreneurs? "Taking the plunge into entrepreneurship is only scary if you haven't done your

homework," he said. "I don't recommend you quit your job, like I did, unless you sit down and really do your homework. You need to identify how you will create new value and you need a market of people willing to pay for your service and/or product. For example, if you want to build an app, you should call 50 people and ask them if they'd be willing to pay for your app. Getting that feedback is crucial. Lastly, if you want to keep development costs low, go to where you can find cheap labor. If you know how to work with people in different time zones, you can save a lot of money."

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